

A REPORT ON  
**THE THIRD UNIVERSAL  
TRANSIT PASS REFERENDUM**

OF  
THE SIMON FRASER STUDENT SOCIETY

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PRODUCED BY  
**THE CHIEF ELECTORAL OFFICER**

Mr. John J.J. McCullough

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ADDRESSING THE VOTE THAT WAS HELD ON THE DAYS OF NOVEMBER 6  
AND 7, IN THE TWO-THOUSAND AND SEVENTH YEAR OF OUR LORD

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In the Fifty-Fifth Year of the Reign of Our Sovereign Lady,  
Queen Elizabeth the Second

## INTRODUCTION

### **President Harder and Members of the Board,**

I present this to you, my second report as Chief Electoral Officer of the Simon Fraser Student Society. It was my great honor to once again serve in this post, and preside over another inspiring display of student democracy at SFU.

The 2007 U-Pass referendum was a largely smooth and uneventful affair, once again made all the smoother by a highly competent electoral commission and very helpful SFSS staff.

In this brief report I will summarize the referendum that has just concluded and discuss the logistics of what my electoral commission did, in the hopes that such records may be useful to future IECs and SFSS boards in the future.

I conclude with an assessment of the problems that were raised by this referendum, and indeed the SFSS election regime in general.

J.J. McCullough

Chief Electoral Officer

November 15, 2007

## **A HISTORY OF THE U-PASS**

Creating a discount transit pass for SFU students was a longtime goal of many successive SFSS boards, but it was not until the early 2000's that the idea fully began to materialize. In 2001 the student society formally began to research the creation of a "Universal Transit Program" or "U-Pass," and entered into negotiations with TransLink to establish the details. The final deal proposed raising student society fees by \$23 per month, and in exchange students would receive a special transit pass allowing them unlimited access to all TransLink services for the their entire semester of enrolment. A student vote to approve the U-Pass proposal was set to be held in April of 2002, concurrent with the student society election.

Because of the fee increase involved, the U-Pass idea was not universally popular at the time, and formal student groups arose to both support and protest the proposal. A few weeks before the vote IEC Chief Johanna Mongomerie chose to cancel the U-Pass referendum, on account of infractions committed by the "Yes" campaign prior to the scheduled vote.

A second vote was then rescheduled for November 12-14. Again, formal "Yes" and "No" campaigns arose, with opinion strongly polarized. The end result was a vote in favor by a razor-thin margin of 33 votes out of nearly 6,000. The U-Pass program came into effect in the fall of 2003.

As the years progressed, the U-Pass steadily became more popular. Many students who had not previously used public transportation began to do so, to the point where TransLink is now facing something of a crisis over a dramatically increased ridership.

A second U-Pass referendum was held during the SFSS general election of 2005. The question this time asked students if they would support a \$1.50 monthly increase in the U-Pass fee. Despite the question, the fee increase was TransLink's necessary precondition for continuing the U-Pass itself; thus students were really once again voting on whether or not to continue with the entire U-Pass program.

The 2005 results were decidedly more lopsided. Out of nearly 4,800 voters, 82% voted in favor of the fee increase, and thus in support of continuing the U-Pass program.

A third U-Pass referendum was called by the SFSS board in October of 2007. Once again, TransLink had requested a monthly increase in the U-Pass fee be approved by students as a precondition of continuing the program.

## PREPARATION

The SFSS Board of Directors appointed a new independent electoral commission in October of 2007. The team was as follows:

J.J. McCULLOUGH, CHIEF COMMISSIONER

STEVAN ANAS, COMMISSIONER

MATTHEW CHURCHILL, COMMISSIONER

MELISSA DOBUD, COMMISSIONER

ROWAN SAWYER, COMMISSIONER

Myself, Stevan Anas, and Rowan Sawyer were all incumbent commissioners who were re-appointed. Matthew Churchill and Melissa Dobud can be best described as ordinary students, who though somewhat politically connected to the SFSS subculture, held no significant positions in the Society prior to this appointment.

The first meeting of the new IEC took place on Tuesday, October 16. The IEC would proceed to meet every subsequent Tuesday afternoon, with our final meeting of the referendum period occurring on November 13.

Official notice of the referendum was served on Monday, October 15. Posters were distributed around campus, and a full-page ad was placed in the October 15 issue of The Peak. A half-page ad would later be printed in the November 5 issue as well.

The week before the referendum I similarly designed some referendum-awareness posters of my own, and, with IEC help, made many copies and posted them all over the three SFU campuses. The IEC website was likewise updated with all relevant information.

With the help of Ms. Bobbie Grant in the University's student services department, I sent an email to all students on November 5, the day before the first day of voting. In the email I encouraged students to vote, and explained the hours and locations of the five polling stations. I also asked any off-campus students to give me their contact information so I could set them up with an absentee ballot. In retrospect this latter action was a mistake, for reasons I will discuss later.

## CAMPAIGNS

Shortly after the referendum was officially declared, Derrick Harder, the President of the Student Society, informed me that he wished to lead a campaign of support for the U-Pass, on behalf of the Society's board of directors. On October 16 the IEC voted to approve his campaign as the official "yes" side of the U-Pass campaign.

No students ever came forward to lead a campaign of opposition to the U-Pass. Considering the enormous margin of support the referendum would ultimately pass by, this was not particularly surprising.

President Harder and SFSS staff produced some flyers and handbills which were approved by the IEC via email. During the course of the election Harder's team led a generally low-key campaign and there were no controversies arising from it.

After the election concluded, I was given a bill by President Harder that indicated his team had spent \$73.71 on campaign supplies, far below the \$300 maximum budget allowed. As the board campaign was funded with SFSS cash, there was no need for the IEC to reimburse any expenses.

Current SFSS legislation (namely AP-27) allows the board of directors to led campaigns of either support or opposition to referendum questions, but I continue to find the matter somewhat ambiguously-defined. As I mentioned in my official report on the SFSS general election of 2007, I strongly believe the board should clarify the language of AP-27, and make it clear that only *two* campaigns may be recognized by the IEC. The present wording makes it seem like the IEC can recognize a maximum of three campaigns; one "yes," one "no," and one board-led. I likewise think the board should clearly define the terms of how and why the IEC chooses to recognize "yes" and "no" campaigns in the future.

## VOTING PROCESS

The SFSS Internal Relations Officer, working with SFSS staff, hired around two dozen poll clerks. As is the custom for this procedure, the IEC played no formal role in this process so I cannot speak to the specifics of how the hiring was conducted. On Monday, November 5, the day before the first day of the referendum, SFSS staffer Anthony Maragna and myself conducted a brief orientation seminar for all newly-hired poll clerks in which we informed them about the voting procedures they would be supervising and administering.

As has become the custom for SFSS elections, voting was held at five different locations on all of SFU's three campuses. The locations were as follows:

1. W.A.C. Bennett library, first floor near library entrance (Burnaby campus)
2. Academic Quadrangle, south-east side, near IT office (Burnaby campus)
3. West Mall Complex, second floor, across from Raven's Café (Burnaby campus)
4. Mezzanine, near escalators (Surrey campus)
5. Main floor lobby area, near computer rooms (Harbour Centre campus)

Each of the five polling stations were manned by two clerks who held their post for a half-day shift (9:30-2:30) before being replaced by two others. Each pair of clerks sat at a table with a specially-booked computer, which were either procured from the SFSS board office (in the case of Burnaby) or from the campus IT department (in the case of Vancouver and Surrey). Each computer, in turn, was set up with an internet connection which allowed the clerks to access "SFSS Administration v. 1.1.0," a special program that allows clerks to record the names and student numbers of any student who shows up to vote, thus allowing clerks to confirm the legitimate SFU student status of all voters, as well as ensuring no one votes more than once.

The IEC decided to use simple paper ballots for this vote, rather than the ScanTron ballots that had been used for the previous general election. This was done to save both money and time. Though counting votes by hand is laborious, it is ultimately less complicated than counting ScanTron papers, which requires a trip to the UBC ScanTron facility, and all the related expenses.

## SURVEYS

One unique element of this particular referendum was the presence of SFSS surveys at polling stations, to be distributed alongside ballots. Created by SFSS advocacy staff with the help of the board, the surveys aimed to gauge voter opinion on a number of issues relating to public transportation and the student union itself. The surveys were optional, and voters were free to decline to participate.

I will confess to being rather skeptical of this initiative when I first heard. I personally did not think students would willingly complete a lengthy survey at a polling station, and I expected to find a lot of blank surveys when the voting period concluded. Still, I encouraged the rest of the IEC to approve the distribution of surveys at polling stations, and printed several thousand copies of the questionnaires for the poll clerks to hand out.

My assumptions proved very wrong, however. The surveys were enormously popular, and it appears the vast majority of students who marked a ballot at least partially filled out a questionnaire as well. Some polling stations actually ran out of surveys during voting periods, so this was yet another item I had to run around ensuring everyone was well-stocked with. The board and staff of the SFSS were understandably delighted when I handed over thousands of completed surveys at the end of the day; the wealth of public opinion expressed in the questionnaires will doubtlessly be highly useful.

I believe the popularity of the surveys can be largely attributed to the effectiveness of the poll clerks. From what I witnessed, the clerks were actively “pushing” the documents to voters, often handing out a survey and ballot simultaneously. I think this created a sense of obligation among voters to complete both handouts. The “optional” aspect was certainly downplayed.

Of course, one cannot discount the possibility that the surveys were simply a good idea in themselves, and that students were genuinely interested in filling out the questionnaires and having their opinions heard. I hope the SFSS will eventually offer an analysis of what was said.

## COSTS

Considering the brief and uncontroversial nature of the vote, 2007 U-Pass referendum was quite an expensive undertaking, costing nearly \$7,500.

A complete breakdown of expenses is as follows, based on numbers released to me by the SFSS financial office at the time of writing:

Pay of IEC Commissioners	\$2,350
Pay of Poll Clerks	\$ 3,279
Advertisements in <u>The Peak</u>	\$ 932
Awareness posters / ballot printing at Quad Books	\$ 898
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<b>TOTAL EXPENSES:</b>	<b>\$7,459</b>

## VOTING TOTALS

Members of the IEC counted all ballots on the evening of November 7, after all voting had concluded.

According to the SFSS Administration computer database used to record and verify student voters, a total of 5,592 students voted in the U-Pass referendum. Assuming there are still roughly 23,650 students at SFU, this turnout represents approximately 23 % of the student populace.

4,036 students voted at Burnaby, 387 voted at Harbour Centre, and 660 voted at Surrey.

509 students voted via “double enveloping,” so their campuses were not recorded in the computer database. I believe the vast majority of these voters were probably Burnaby students. The Burnaby campus experienced a great deal of internet-related problems during the two voting days, which in turn led to a lot of poll clerks having to resort to double-enveloping for significant periods of time.

5,580 votes were recorded in some manner, including ballots which were improperly filled out, and thus deemed “spoiled.” However, there is a disparity between the number of votes recorded in the computer database and the number of votes the IEC actually counted. 15 votes evidently disappeared sometime between the balloting and vote counting. It’s possible some students simply walked off with their ballot papers or threw them away. I know for a fact that some students likewise mistakenly put their ballots in the box marked for SFSS surveys rather than the proper ballot box, and these ballots subsequently got misplaced when the surveys were being collected afterwards.

**FINAL ELECTION RESULTS FOR  
THE 2007 U-PASS REFERENDUM**

*The following numbers represent the official results of the 2007 U-Pass referendum, as ratified by the Independent Electoral Commission at their November 12, 2007 meeting.*

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**Whereas** the U-Pass program has been in operation at Simon Fraser University for 5 years; and **Whereas** students taking only Distance Education courses, only designated off-campus courses, and students who live outside of the GVRD will continue to be exempt from the U-Pass program; and **Whereas** a \$50,000 fund will continue to exist to reimburse the whole or partial cost of the U-Pass to students with extenuating circumstances; and, **Whereas** a successful vote will guarantee the price of the U-Pass at \$26.10 per month until September, 2011; and **Whereas** the failure of this question at referendum will terminate the U-Pass program;

**Do you agree to an increase of no more than \$1.60 per month to the U-Pass fee?**

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**YES VOTES..... 5,140 (92.2% of counted votes\*)**

NO VOTES..... 431 (7.7% of counted votes)

SPOILED/INVALID VOTES..... 9

MISSING VOTES±..... 12

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**TOTAL VOTERS..... 5,592**

TOTAL VOTES COUNTED\*..... 5,571

\* “counted” votes signifies any vote that was neither spoiled nor lost.

± 12 votes were misplaced sometime between the voting and counting process.

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**VOTES BY CAMPUS**

BURNABY (all three stations)	4,036
SURREY	660
HARBOUR CENTRE	387
UNKNOWN (Double envelopes)	509

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**TURNOUT AS PERCENTAGE OF STUDENT POPULATION: (23.6%)**

(assuming school population is approximately 23,650)

## PROBLEMS

### 1. Ballot Question

I believe the ballot question of the 2007 referendum was poorly written and needlessly confusing. Too much ballot space was devoted to a lengthy, and largely superfluous preamble, while the question itself (asking students to approve an increase to the U-Pass fee) was not clearly correlated to what voters had been told the referendum itself was about — namely whether to continue the U-Pass program.

Several times during the vote I witnessed students expressing confusion at the ballot and asking poll clerks “how to vote” if they wished to keep the U-Pass. This put poll clerks in an awkward space which I believe is improper.

I noticed that even the SFSS board itself, through its Peak ads and the like, were constantly being forced to clarify and explain a confusing question that *they themselves wrote*. By the end, voters were essentially being told to ignore the convoluted wording of the question itself, and “just vote yes” to continue the U-Pass.

In the future I encourage the board to put more effort into writing clear referendum questions that avoid excessively legalistic preambles and simply offer students a straightforward “up or down” style question. It is not necessary to provide the entire background of an issue on a piece of ballot paper; such information is better saved for informational forums such as the SFSS website or campaign materials. At best such tactics create an unreadable, crowded ballot, at worst it allows for the possibility of leading questions and covert campaigning.

### 2. Logistics

Quite a few logistical problems plagued the referendum voting process. Unfortunately, I believe very few of these problems were actually avoidable, and were instead largely products of what I believe to be the SFSS’ rather outdated method of conducting elections and referenda.

Thankfully, however, none of the problems that plagued the process in any way had an effect on the ultimate outcome of the vote.

The first problem was the matter of ballots. As most know, student union elections are notoriously unpredictable affairs, in which turnout can rarely be accurately gauged ahead of time. Student interest is very fickle, and SFU’s constantly-changing demographics make it difficult to presume that issues which are popular one year will remain so the next. In last year’s election, for example, many predicted that the ballot presence of a referendum question about the student society’s relationship with the Canadian Federation of Students would increase turnout. It did not. I was thus a bit wary about predictions that this U-Pass referendum would have a high turnout simply on the basis that the previous two U-Pass referendums did. Though certainly a plausible assumption, an equally valid counterargument was the fact that the voter turnout had actually *decreased* by more than 1,000 between the 2002 and 2005 votes. It

seemed possible that the turnout would continue to decrease as the U-Pass ceased to be a controversial issue on campus, and instead became largely taken for granted. In short, there was simply no real way to predict turnout, other than idle speculation.

The result was an ongoing ballot shortage. During the course of the two days of voting, the voting stations on the Burnaby campus were constantly running out of ballots. Running back and forth, I thus had to constantly redistribute ballots from station to station, ensuring that everyone had a stable supply for the time being, while also frequently running to Quad Books in-between, to get more ballot pages printed out. Tiring though it may have been, I was ultimately able to ensure that every voting station had sufficient ballots at all times; tables were rarely out of stock for more than a few minutes. Quad Books deserves enormous praise for their role in this mini-crisis; their printing was always exceedingly prompt, even on my short notice.

The second problem was the internet. Throughout the two days, the internet at Burnaby campus was constantly “going down,” for unclear reasons, meaning poll clerks were often unable to use the SFSS Administration program to record voters, and instead had to resort to the double-enveloping technique. Over 500 votes had to be double-enveloped, a depressingly high number. Having to frequently resort to this method greatly slowed down the voting process at polling stations, and though I did not witness much evidence to suggest voters were turned away by the slowness, it did make the poll clerks’ jobs that much more of a hassle. In addition to the ballots, I also spent much time running around ensuring all poll tables were well-stocked with envelopes during downtimes, as the double-enveloping technique predictably consumes a great deal.

I am not a computer expert so I have little idea what caused the chronically sporadic internet connections on Burnaby those days. I understand the SFU Burnaby internet network in general can be quite poor at times. Luckily some poll clerks were able to subvert the poor connection by using the SFSS Administration program on their personal laptops, which evidently were able to secure better internet connections than the board computers.

As an aside, I would like to note that neither of the abovementioned problems, i.e., the sporadic internet or ballot shortages, plagued the Surrey or Vancouver campuses. Smaller turnouts and an evidently much more stable Internet regime ensured voting at the two satellite campuses was far less eventful.

## SOLUTIONS

**The Simon Fraser Student Society simply must embrace online voting as soon as possible.** I made this recommendation in my report on the general election of 2007, but I have seen absolutely no evidence that the Board has made any efforts to pursue this goal. I understand this lack of initiative has largely been justified by convoluted political concerns relating to the Canadian Federation of Students, but this is no excuse in my mind. If the CFS will not permit SFU's "de-federation" vote to be conducted electronically, fine, but certainly that should not stagnate the development of electronic voting for all other elections and referenda as well. Fearful conspiracy theories about far-off lawsuits in the future should not negate the pursuit of rational election policies in the present.

I do not understand why this referendum was not conducted electronically. Frankly, I think it defies common-sense. Throughout the course of the vote I was continually asked by students why they could not vote online, especially in the wake of the Graduate Student Society and Senate elections. I had no explanation, and could only blame the indifference of the people running the SFSS, and their very complicated, paranoid beliefs about the CFS.

The Graduate Student Society, which has barely existed for more than a few months, was able to establish a fully-functional online voting system in time for their various referenda in October. The Simon Fraser University Senate has likewise conducted their last two student senator elections online. So too has the Alma Mater Society of UBC, and doubtlessly dozens of other student unions both in BC and across the country. The technology exists, and it is easy to use. The recently-departed Anthony Maragna suggested to me that it would likely take no more than a week to set an electronic voting system up for the SFSS, considering the substantial online voting infrastructure that already exists at this school.

Hiring dozens of overpaid poll clerks is a waste of money, and printing thousands of pages of ballot papers and surveys is a logistical headache, and terrible for the environment. ScanTron sheets are even more expensive and time-consuming to produce and count, and I very much dread their return at the next general election. It depresses me to think of all the time I will waste this March dealing with issues relating to ballots and poll clerks that could be better spent on awareness initiatives and working with candidates.

The present SFSS board has been an enormously transformative administration in a number of ways. I implore the society to continue this theme, and make the general election of 2008 the first SFSS election to feature fully online voting. The full support and resources of the IEC will be at the board's disposal.

We have over three months to do it. Let's make history together.

-J.J. McCullough  
Chief Electoral Officer